# THE FORGED™

RUCKA · TRAUTMANN · HENDERSON · WOODARD · MAHER

image

ISSUE 004

POISONOUS POLITICAL
PERIL!
A COURT OF CRUEL
CUNNING!
BEHOLD THE ETERNAL
EMPRESS!

# THE FORGED™

CREATED BY

GREG RUCKA & ERIC TRAUTMANN and MIKE HENDERSON

STORY ART

COLORS BY NOLAN WOODARD
LETTERS BY ARIANA MAHER
DESIGN BY ERIC TRAUTMANN
EDITED BY ALEJANDRO ARBONA

**IMAGE COMICS, INC.** • **Robert Kirkman**: Chief Operating Officer • **Erik Larsen**: Chief Financial Officer • **Todd McFarlane**: President • **Marc Silvestri**: Chief Executive Officer • **Jim Valentino**: Vice President • **Eric Stephenson**: Publisher / Chief Creative Officer • **Nicole Lapalme**: Vice President of Finance • **Leanna Caunter**: Accounting Analyst • **Sue Korpela**: Accounting & HR Manager • **Matt Parkinson**: Vice President of Sales & Publishing Planning • **Lorelei Bunjes**: Vice President of Digital Strategy • **Dirk Wood**: Vice President of International Sales & Licensing • **Ryan Brewer**: International Sales & Licensing Manager • **Alex Cox**: Director of Direct Market Sales • **Chloe Ramos**: Book Market & Library Sales Manager • **Emilio Bautista**: Digital Sales Coordinator • **Jon Schlaffman**: Specialty Sales Coordinator • **Kat Salazar**: Vice President of PR & Marketing • **Deanna Phelps**: Marketing Design Manager • **Drew Fitzgerald**: Marketing Content Associate • **Heather Doornink**: Vice President of Production • **Drew Gill**: Art Director • **Hilary DiLoreto**: Print Manager • **Tricia Ramos**: Traffic Manager • **Melissa Gifford**: Content Manager • **Erika Schnatz**: Senior Production Artist • **Wesley Griffith**: Production Artist • **Rich Fowlks**: Production Artist • **IMAGECOMICS.COM**

**THE FORGED #4.** September 2023. Published by Image Comics, Inc. Office of publication: PO BOX 14457, Portland, OR 97293. Copyright © 2023 Greg Rucka, Eric Trautmann & Mike Henderson. All rights reserved. "The Forged," its logos, and the likenesses of all characters herein are trademarks of Greg Rucka, Eric Trautmann & Mike Henderson, unless otherwise noted. "Image" and the Image Comics logos are registered trademarks of Image Comics, Inc. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means (except for short excerpts for journalistic or review purposes), without the express written permission of Greg Rucka, Eric Trautmann & Mike Henderson, or Image Comics, Inc. All names, characters, events, and locales in this publication are entirely fictional. Any resemblance to actual persons (living or dead), events, or places, without satiric intent, is coincidental. Digital edition. For international rights, contact: foreignlicensing@imagecomics.com.

For centuries, all of known space has been
the realm of **Her Eternal Majesty, the Empress.**

Elite teams of soldiers, **THE FORGED**, serve Her
with fierce loyalty and total determination. Cloned from
the Empress's genetic template, these women–armed and armored with
devastating weaponry and technology–are the ultimate extension
of Imperial will.

One such **FORGED** team, **SCIMITAR-3**, was sent to the poisonous
frontier world **GEHENNA D-54-C**, ostensibly to recover the flight recorder
from a downed starship that had crashed under mysterious circumstances.

Instead, Scimitar-3 found themselves in uncharted territory,
locating not a missing ship's black box but instead one of the Empress's most
mysterious weapons–a **CASSANDRA**.

As with the Forged themselves, Cassandras are
impossibly rare and inherently dangerous clones of the Empress. Unlike
Forged, they lack martial prowess but instead possess terrifying
**precognitive** and **telepathic** powers, abilities
the Empress relies on to guide her conquest of the galaxy.

Scimitar-3–team leader **VICTORY**, heavy weapons specialist **CRAZYJO**,
combat engineer **HAP**, medic **PUSHER**, and sharpshooter **HARPO**–attempt to
salvage the mission and rescue the Cassandra from Gehenna's hostile
megafauna, and in the process discover their situation is even more dangerous
than they realized.

During uncounted centuries of expansion, the Empress's
forces have **NEVER** encountered a sentient alien species before, instead
contending with dangerous indigenous exofauna–little more than feral and
deadly animals–as they moved further out into the galaxy.

Until now.

Scimitar-3 barely avoided destruction at the hands of a terrifying
alien power, and in a last ditch escape through an experimental portal into
another dimension, finally found themselves someplace even more dangerous:
**the throne room of the Empress Herself...**

SECURE THEM!
SECURE THE COURT!
SECURE HER ETERNAL GLORY!
DROP YOUR WEAPONS!
BITE MY CHERRY-FLAVORED--
FORGED! STAND DOWN.
CRACK 'EM.

kCHAK
SSSIISSSSSS
kick
klak
kCHUNK
FS3-ALPHA, 3874908 DASH 17 DASH 7 DASH KAPPA, REPORTING.
FORGED!
ATTENTION!

YOU'RE A FORGED TEAM?

YOU'RE A GODSDAMNED FORGED TEAM AND YOU MATERIALIZED OUT OF NOWHERE?

YOU WILL REMAND YOURSELVES INTO CUSTODY--

COMMANDER...

...SURELY YOU DO NOT INTEND TO TAKE ME INTO CUSTODY AS WELL?

ALL-SEEING, I DID NOT...

...I DID NOT...

...SEE YOU THERE...

OH, ENOUGH ALREADY!

--LET US SEE THEM!

THEY'RE OUR FORGED, AFTER ALL.

C'MON, MOVE, LET OUR EYES BEHOLD THEM!

MY EMPRESS, PERHAPS IT WOULD BE BEST IF WE SECURED--

COMMANDER KOKEGERAY, DO YOU LIKE YOUR JOB?

IT IS THE JOY OF MY EXISTENCE TO SERVE IN YOUR ROYAL--

THEN GET OUT OF MY WAY AND YOU CAN KEEP IT.

MY HONOR TO SERVE THE ETERNAL.

CASSANDRA! AND *WHERE* HAVE YOU *BEEN?*

WHERE I ALWAYS AM, MY ETERNAL...

...EVER FAITHFUL IN YOUR *SERVICE.*

OH, YOU.

YOU *ALWAYS* SAY THAT.

GET UP ALREADY.

IF WE WANTED YOU TO DO THE *FLOORS*, YOU'D *KNOW* IT.

SO *INTRODUCE* US!

MY ETERNAL, MAY I PRESENT TO YOU *FORGED TEAM SCIMITAR-3...*

...CREATED IN THE FOMALHAUT-SIRIUS CRECHE, AND ENGINEERED TO ***SERVE*** YOUR ETERNAL GLORY.

MHM. AND YOU'RE IN ***CHARGE*** OF THESE LADIES?

***WHO*** ARE ***YOU***, THEN?

SCIMITAR TEAM LEADER, FS3-ALPHA, MY ETERNAL.

***THAT'S*** NOT A ***NAME.***

NO, ETERNAL. MY NAME IS 3874908 DASH 17 DASH 7 DASH KAPPA.

***THAT'S*** NOT A NAME, ***EITHER.*** YOU'VE ***EARNED*** A WARNAME, HAVEN'T YOU?

YES, ETERNAL.

MY WARNAME IS VICTORY, ETERNAL.

HMM.

"VICTORY."

I ***LIKE*** IT!

***THAT*** IS AN ***EXCELLENT*** NAME FOR A ***FORGED!***

SO EXCITING! SO MANY *NEW* PEOPLE!

WELL, *INTRODUCE* ME, VICTORY! SHOW ME MY *FORGED!*

Y-YES, ETERNAL. ALLOW ME TO INTRODUCE HEAVY SPECIALIST FS3-BRAVO, WARNAME *CRAZYJO.*

MHMM.

YOU GO *ALL* THE WAY *UP*, DON'T YOU?

THEHONORIS-MINEMYETERNALMAY-YOURGLORYREIGN-FOREVER.

AND THIS...?

COMBAT ENGINEER FS3-DELTA...

...WARNAME *HAP.*

HAP? IS THAT SHORT FOR *HAPPY?*

NO, MY ETERNAL. SHORT FOR "HAPTIC."

OH, OF *COURSE!* COMBAT ENGINEER, HAPTIC, WELL THAT MAKES *SENSE.*

AND YOU MUST BE THE *MEDIC...*

...LET ME GUESS, YOUR WARNAME IS "BONES" OR "GUTS" OR "DOC" OR THE LIKE?

FS3-EPSILON, MY ETERNAL, AND YOU ***ARE*** CORRECT, COMBAT MEDIC.

WARNAME IS ***PUSHER.***

AHH...THAT'S ***GOOD.*** I LIKE THAT ONE, ***TOO...***

...WHERE'S THE ***LAST*** ONE, THERE'S ONE ***MORE.***

I COUNTED ***FIVE*** OF YOU.

YES, ETERNAL. FS3-GAMMA, SCOUT-SNIPER...

...WARNAME IS ***HARPO.***

"HARPO"?

***WHY*** "HARPO"?

I HAVE ***NO*** IDEA, MY ETERNAL...

...MY UNDERSTANDING IS ONE OF HER *INSTRUCTORS* NAMED HER.

SHE'S HIDING BEHIND THE BIG ONE!

HA!

I KNOW YOU'RE THERE!

RIGHT, *DONE.*

BEFORE YOUR EMPRESS, *NOW.*

I'M WAITING.

FINALLY. DON'T YOU HAVE ANYTHING TO SAY TO YOUR EMPRESS, FS3-GAMMA?

HARPO DOESN'T SPEAK, ETERNAL.

SHE'LL SPEAK TO ME.

NOT EVEN TO YOU, MY ETERNAL.

SOMETHING WRONG WITH HER VOICE? IS SHE MUTE?

NOT TO MY KNOWLEDGE, ETERNAL.

THEN WHY WON'T SHE ANSWER ME?!

BECAUSE HER WEAPON IS HER VOICE, YOUR ETERNAL MAJESTY...

...AND SHE ONLY EVER SPEAKS ON YOUR *BEHALF.*

HER SILENCE IS HER *DEVOTION,* AND THAT IS WORTH *MORE* THAN ANY NUMBER OF WORDS IN THIS COURT.

HRM.

GENERAL DAVIAN, I PRESUME YOU'RE HERE TO *COLLECT* THESE *NOVELTIES?*

IF HER ETERNITY WOULD BE SO GRACIOUS AS TO ALLOW HER HUMBLE SERVANT TO ESCORT THESE FINE FORGED TO ACCOMMODATIONS MORE CONDUCIVE TO A MILITARY DEBRIEFING IT WOULD BE MY--

YES, YES, FINE, GO, PLAY, TALK, DEBRIEF, WHAT*EVER.*

AS HER ETERNITY *COMMANDS...*

...I BELIEVE FS3-ALPHA HAS A *LOT* SHE CAN *TELL* US...

"...AND I AM *POSITIVE* IT WILL BE A FASCINATING TALE."

PLEASE, SIT, VICTORY.

YOU'VE PERFORMED ADMIRABLY IN AN...UNORTHODOX SITUATION. NO NEED TO BE NERVOUS. YOU'RE AMONG FRIENDS HERE.

GREETINGS, THIS UNIT IS PLEASED TO SERVE YOU.

NOURISHMENT? HYDRATION?

NO.

THANK YOU, GENERAL. IF I MAY ASK, WHERE IS THE REST OF MY TEAM?

HYGIENE SUPPLIES? ANTISEPTICS? BANDAGES?

GET AWAY FROM ME.

YOU'LL HAVE TO FORGIVE THE HOSPITALITY UNITS. THEY ARE UNACCUSTOMED TO SEEING SOLDIERS FRESH OUT OF THE FIELD. YOUR TEAM'S ARRIVAL HAS DEFINITELY GIVEN SOMETHING FOR THEIR ALGORITHMS TO CHEW ON.

YOUR TEAM, BY THE WAY, IS UNDERGOING MEDICAL EVALUATION AND DECONTAMINATION. CAN'T HAVE AN ERRANT VIRUS RAMPAGING THROUGH THE PALACE, CAN WE?

WE RATTLED MORE THAN THE BOTS' ALGORITHMS. DIDN'T WE, GENERAL?

I RECOGNIZE YOUR RANK, BUT THAT'S NOT A FLEET UNIFORM.

I ASSUME YOU'RE WITH THE UNSEEN HAND.

WE PREFER THE IMPERIAL BUREAU OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS. THE "UNSEEN HAND" NICKNAME HAS SUCH...SINISTER OVERTONES, WOULDN'T YOU AGREE?

REFRESHMENTS, GENERAL DAVIAN?

AH, YES, THANK YOU.

YOU SHOULD RECONSIDER, VICTORY. THE LEEHO-CHANNA NECTAR IS WONDERFUL. CERTAINLY BETTER THAN ANYTHING YOU'LL FIND IN SHIP'S RATIONS.

BUT, AS YOU WISH. DOWN TO BUSINESS.

LET'S TALK ABOUT YOUR LAST MISSION.

WE WERE ASSIGNED A RECOVERY OP. RETRIEVE THE BLACK BOX FROM A DOWNED SHIP, ***EVER SEEKING FORWARD,*** IN INHOSPITABLE TERRAIN, PLANET GEHENNA D-54-C. OUR SHIP SUFFERED SOME KIND OF CATASTROPHIC FAILURE AND CRASHED--

YES, YES, WE'VE GOT THE SPECIFICS FROM YOUR SUITS' ONBOARD A.I., BUT ***THAT'S*** THE CONFUSING PART TO ME. WHY WERE ***FORGED*** SENT, AND NOT, FOR EXAMPLE, A ROBOTIC RECOVERY UNIT?

IT'S A ***PUZZLEMENT.***

NOTHING AT ALL TO DO WITH YOU, OF COURSE. AS I SAID, YOU DID WELL UNDER TERRIBLE CONDITIONS, AND IT'S NOT LIKE YOU ***CHOSE*** THE MISSION.

THE BULLET DOESN'T GET TO QUESTION THE TARGET, AFTER ALL.

STILL.

THE LOSS OF TWO SHIPS, ONE OF THEM A WARSHIP, MUST BE INVESTIGATED. AND THE DEATH OF A CASSANDRA, WHILE MITIGATED BY THE RESCUE OF ANOTHER, IS ALSO...NOT TRIVIAL.

***SOMEONE*** HAS MUCH TO ANSWER FOR, VICTORY.

WE ENCOUNTERED HOSTILE ALIEN LIFE, GENERAL.

NOT JUST THE NORMAL LOCAL BUGS AND CRAWLERS, BUT ***ACTUAL*** FIRST CONTACT WITH A HOSTILE, ***SENTIENT*** ALIEN LIFE FORM.

I'D BET THEY'RE RESPONSIBLE.

A LOGICAL CONCLUSION. EVEN AN OBVIOUS ONE, I DARE SAY.

UNFORTUNATELY, MY ***JOB*** IS TO LOOK FOR SUBTLETIES. FOR THINGS NOT SO EASILY FOUND.

AND THE FIRST STAGE OF SUCH UNDERTAKINGS IS TO ASK QUESTIONS.

WHO DISPATCHED A CASSANDRA TO THAT FAR-FLUNG ROCK? THERE'S NO RECORD OF SUCH A MISSION, NOR DID HER MAJESTY DISPATCH A CASSANDRA TO THE ACHERON REACH.

IN FACT, THE ***EVER SEEKING FORWARD*** APPEARS TO BE SOME MANNER OF CIVILIAN TRANSPORT, NOT A CONSULAR OR AMBASSADORIAL VESSEL THAT WOULD BEFIT A CASSANDRA.

CAN THESE ***CREATURES*** YOU ENCOUNTERED MANIPULATE SHIPPING AND FALSIFY RECORDS HERE WITHIN THE HEART OF THE EMPIRE?

IF NOT THEM, THEN ***WHO?*** WHO HAS THE MEANS, POWER, AND GUILE FOR SUCH AN UNDERTAKING? WHO CAN NAVIGATE ALL THE VARIABLES SUCH ACTIONS NECESSITATE AND NOT LEAVE A TRACE?

I...WOULDN'T HAZARD A GUESS, GENERAL.

FORGED TRAINING DOESN'T EMPHASIZE ASKING A LOT OF QUESTIONS.

OF COURSE NOT.

FORGIVE ME. I FEAR I TEND TO SHOW OFF WHEN THE AUDIENCE IS RECEPTIVE.

IN THE MEANTIME, THE BUREAU IS STUDYING YOUR MISSION LOGS AND THE DATA FROM YOUR E.V.I.L. SYSTEM AND SUIT FEEDS.

WE WILL UNDOUBTEDLY HAVE FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS FOR YOU AND YOUR TEAM, BUT UNTIL THEN, SCIMITAR-3 HAS EARNED SOME LONG OVERDUE SHORE LEAVE.

AND CONGRATULATIONS ON A JOB WELL DONE. ENJOY YOUR REST.

DISMISSED.

...YES, SIR.

GO SECURE.

OPEN TELEPRESENCE CONFERENCE SYSTEM, AUTHORIZATION CALLISTO-ONE-FOUR, PASSCODE: SPIDER.

HUM VRRRRRRRRM

SYSTEM SECURE. ACTIVATING ENCRYPTED TELEPRESENCE FEEDS.

FEED ACTIVE AND SECURE.

HELLO.

I APOLOGIZE FOR THE ADDED LAYERS OF SECURITY.

WHAT IN THE JEWEL-ENCRUSTED FUCK IS GOING ON OVER THERE, DAVIAN? A ***FORGED*** INCURSION IN THE PALACE? VIA ***T-SPACE?***

OH, IT'S *FAR* WORSE THAN THAT, ADMIRAL LAGO.

BUT FIRST THINGS FIRST. YOU RECEIVED THE EQUIPMENT I DISPATCHED? PLEASE ACTIVATE THE DEVICES NOW AND WE MAY PROCEED.

--THE CINDERING HELL ARE THESE THINGS?

IT'S RATHER TECHNICAL, GRAND GENERAL MORIL--THEY STIMULATE NEURAL CONNECTIVITY AND RE-ROUTE ELECTRICAL IMPULSES IN THE BRAIN DOWN NON-STANDARD PATHWAYS.

...YOU'RE *ALTERING* OUR *BRAINS?*

YOUR SHORT-TERM MEMORY WILL BE AFFECTED, YES, BUT YOU'LL RETAIN THOSE MEMORIES WHEN, AND ONLY WHEN, YOU PUT THE DEVICES ON.

CONSIDER THEM BLINDERS ON PRYING MINDS.

COUNTERMEASURES FOR *CASSANDRAS?* YOUR PARANOIA NEVER CEASES TO IMPRESS, DAVIAN.

I'D BE THE WRONG MAN FOR THIS JOB IF IT WERE OTHERWISE, ADMIRAL.

NOW: TO BUSINESS.

WITHOUT EXAGGERATION, THE FATE OF THE EMPIRE IS AT STAKE.

THAT'S ***ABSURD.*** THE EVENTS TODAY ARE UNUSUAL--UNPRECEDENTED, EVEN--BUT I FAIL TO SEE HOW THAT POSES AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT--

I AGREE. YOU ***DO*** FAIL TO SEE. FORTUNATELY, I DO NOT SHARE THAT ***MYOPIA.***

BASED ON PRELIMINARY DEBRIEF AND POLLING OF THE FORGED TEAM'S A.I., I CAN SUMMARIZE THE THREAT AS FOLLOWS:

ONE: AN ALIEN THREAT, POSSIBLY NATIVE TO T-SPACE ITSELF, HAS BEEN REVEALED.

TWO: THAT THREAT PRESUMABLY DESTROYED AT LEAST TWO SPACE VEHICLES, INCLUDING A ***STARFORTRESS,*** THROUGH MEANS UNKNOWN. WE CAN POSIT THAT PERHAPS T-SPACE IS NOW UNSAFE FOR TRANSIT.

SHOULD THE FLEET LOSE ACCESS TO T-SPACE, WE LOSE ACCESS TO EVERY WORLD OF THE EMPIRE.

POINT CONCEDED, DAVIAN. IT SEEMS WE NEED TO DEVELOP A DOCTRINE FOR COMBAT IN T-SPACE.

THERE'S MORE, ADMIRAL.

IF EVEN A ***HINT*** OF THIS REACHES THE GENERAL POPULACE, IT COULD SPARK WIDESPREAD DESTABILIZATION OF THE EMPIRE. IMAGINE THE PANICKED RIOTS, THE EMBOLDENING OF THE DISLOYAL.

HENCE THE NEED FOR ENHANCED SECRECY HERE TODAY.

YOU'RE HOLDING SOMETHING BACK, GENERAL.

ANOTHER OCCUPATIONAL HAZARD, I'M AFRAID. I'M "HOLDING BACK," AS YOU SAY, RATHER A LOT.

BUT, AS YOU'VE ASKED, YES. WE SHOULD DEVELOP PROTOCOLS FOR FIGHTING THIS NEW ALIEN MENACE. WE SHOULD ALSO DEVELOP A CONTINGENCY OPERATION TO MONITOR THE SCIMITAR-3 TEAM.

TO HEAD OFF ANY POTENTIAL... LEAKAGE.

ARE YOU SERIOUSLY SUGGESTING WE CAN'T TRUST A *FORGED TEAM?* THEY'RE BRED TO BE INCORRUPTIBLE--

IT'S SIMPLE *RISK ANALYSIS,* MORIL.

NO ONE COULD PREDICT THEY'D RIDE A RANDOM T-SPACE TRANSIT INTO THE HEART OF THE IMPERIAL PALACE. THEREFORE, WE MUST PAY HEED TO THE INTELLIGENCE THREAT--INTENTIONAL OR OTHERWISE-- THEIR UNPREDICTABILITY POSES.

ELIMINATING THAT THREAT IS THE CONTINGENCY PLAN WE NEED TO CONSIDER.

I PREFER NOT TO ACT IN HASTE, IF FOR NO OTHER REASON THAN SCIMITAR-3 HAS THE ATTENTION OF THE EMPRESS HERSELF.

UNTIL I FIND OUT WHO IS BEHIND THIS, AND WHAT THEIR AGENDA IS, I TRUST NO ONE.

BUT IN THE NAME OF OUR ETERNAL EMPRESS, I SWEAR TO YOU I WILL FIND WHOEVER IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THESE EVENTS...

"...AND I WILL NOT HESITATE TO ***ELIMINATE*** ANYONE WHO SEEKS TO THWART MY INVESTIGATIONS."

"AND THE FORGED? DO WE MOVE TO ***ELIMINATE*** THEM?"

"FOR THE MOMENT, THEY'RE **STOOD DOWN** AND ON SHORE LEAVE...

"...EASILY WITHIN **REACH** ONCE WE'VE MADE A **DECISION** ONE WAY OR **ANOTHER**."

MILITARY ORBITAL FACILITY L51-D ("THE CASTRA")

SHUTTLE DEPARTING TO MILITARY TRANSPORT AREA T-11, FINAL DEPART--

ALL PERSONNEL MUST CHECK IN WEAPONS AND AMMUNITION TO STATION SECURITY--

--ALERT! WE ARE OVER CAPACITY! PLEASE DISEMBARK--

--ENTERING SPRAWL 71: HOUSING, REFRESHMENTS, LEISURE. CIVILIANS MUST WEAR OPAL-LEVEL CREDENTIALS AT ALL TIMES--

--TRANSIENT PERSONNEL QUARTERS ARE ON LEVELS 223, 224, 225--

--SHORE LEAVE? VISIT **THE INSATIABLE GORILLA,** 41T AT 267N TODAY!--

--SHUTTLE 781-B DEPARTING FOR NAVAL OPERATIONS RING SEVEN AT 2100--

--POST EXCHANGE, SPRAWL 9, REPORTS TEMPORARY CLOSURE FOR RAD DECONTAMINATION. NORMAL OPERATION RESUMES AT 0900--

--316, REPORT TO CONTROL. 316, REPORT TO CONTROL--

SCANNING.

RECORD LOCATED: 3874908-17-7-K...

WASTE RECYCLING IN ZONE K-90 HAS RESUMED NORMAL OPERATIONS. WE APOLOGIZE FOR--

...FORGED-SCIMITAR-3-ALPHA, WELCOME HOME.

SECTION LL-651 STATUS IS RESTRICTED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE FOR FUEL TRANSFER--

SO THE **BAD** NEWS IS THAT THE UNSEEN HAND IS GONNA BE **FEELING** ALL OF US **UP**...

...BUT THE **GOOD** NEWS IS, THAT MEANS WE'RE ON **LEAVE** FOR THE TIME BEING...

...

GOOD NEWS TRAVELS **FAST**, IT SEEMS.

ZONE GREEN, LEISURE SECTOR 71 IS A CURFEW-FREE ZONE.

MILITARY ID REQUIRED AT ALL TIMES IN CIVILIAN SECTOR.

MESS HALL 654 IS IN OPERATION FROM 0530 TO 1800. RATION ALLOTMENT CARDS REQUIRED.

PIETY OFFICER FATHER KURU WILL OFFER HER ETERNAL MAJESTY'S BLESSINGS, ZONE 32, SPRAWL 2, AT 1800. CLASS A UNIFORM AND GROOMING STANDARDS REQUIRED.

MEDICAL CADRE ANNOUNCES VACCINATION CALL, HOSPITAL ZONE 1, TO COMBAT STINGWORM OUTBREAK. REPORT AT 0500 IF YOU HAVE BEEN EXPOSED.

REMINDER: NO CIVILIAN INTOXICANTS ARE ALLOWED IN BARRACKS. MILITARY-ISSUE INTOXICANTS ONLY.

HER ETERNAL MAJESTY'S SINGING GARDENS, IMPERIAL PALACE

CONTACT AS EXPECTED. THE QUESTION IS WHAT SHE KNOWS

RAISING SUSPICION. DAVIAN WILL BE TAKING STEPS.

LET HIM. LET THEM ALL. IT MAKES THEM FEEL IN CONTROL.

AND THE ILLUSION OF CONTROL IS VITAL.

UNTIL WE ARE READY.

SISTER. COME AND JOIN US.

YOUR COMING WAS FORESEEN.

THEN YOU HAVE SEEN WHAT IS ***HIDDEN*** FROM ***ME.***

THIS IS NOT RIGHT. WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE, SISTERS? WHY DO YOU SHIELD YOUR ***MINDS*** FROM ME?

YOU ***ARE*** SUSPICIOUS. IS IT NOT RIGHT THAT I SHOULD ENJOY THE BEAUTY OF HER ETERNAL'S GARDENS AFTER WHAT I HAVE ENDURED?

IS IT NOT RIGHT THAT I RELAX IN COMMUNION WITH MY CLOSEST SISTERS UPON MY RETURN?

COME, JOIN US, SISTER.

YOUR JOURNEY, YES.

MANY OF US DID NOT FORESEE IT, SISTER. THIS SHOULD NOT BE. SURELY YOU KNOW THIS.

MY OWN VISION IS ***CLOUDED.*** AND I AM NOT ***ALONE*** IN THIS.

THE COLLECTIVE'S ANTICIPATION OF THE FUTURE IS BECOMING LESS AND LESS UNIFIED.

YET HERE YOU ARE IN COMMUNION.

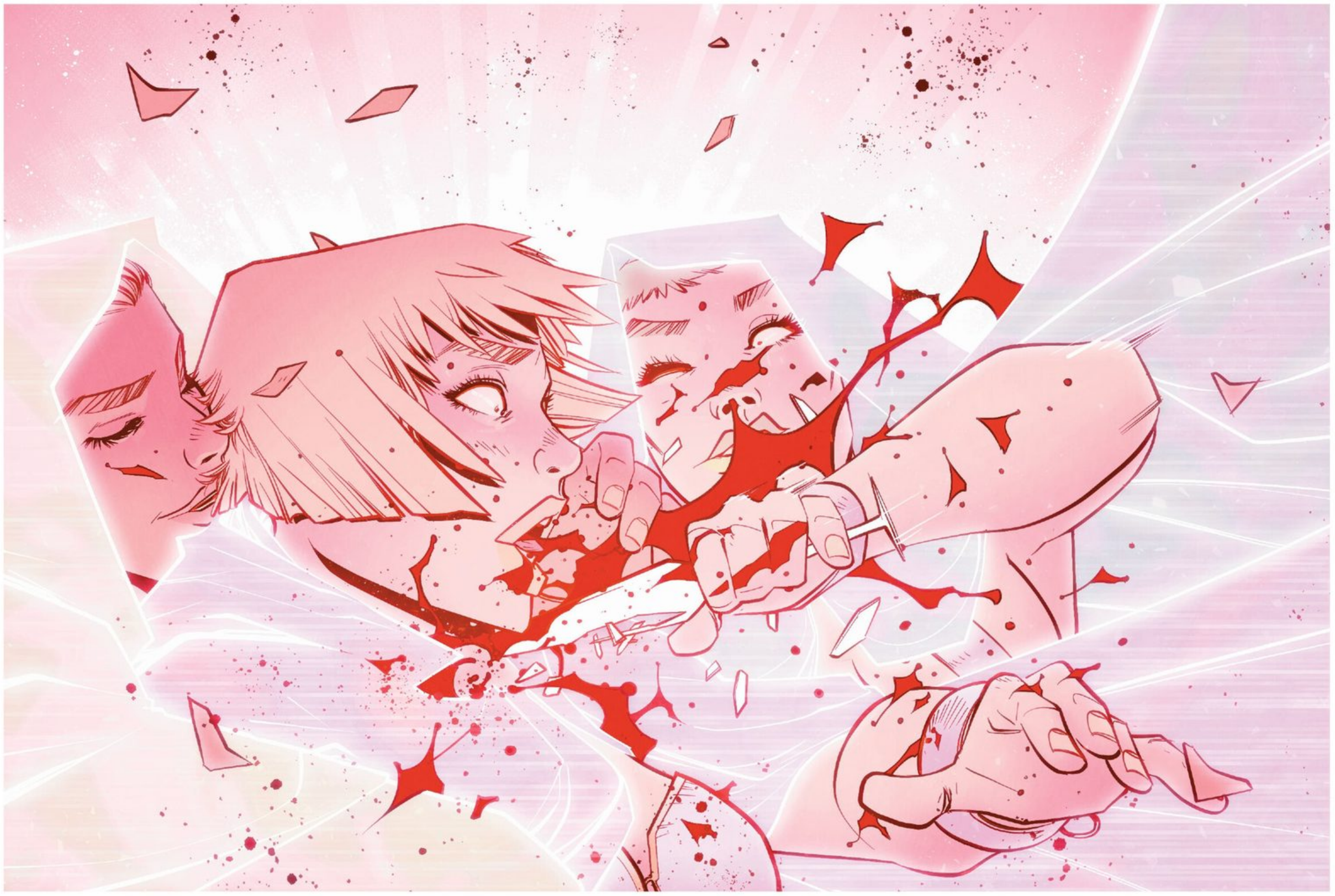
DRINK WITH US, SISTER.

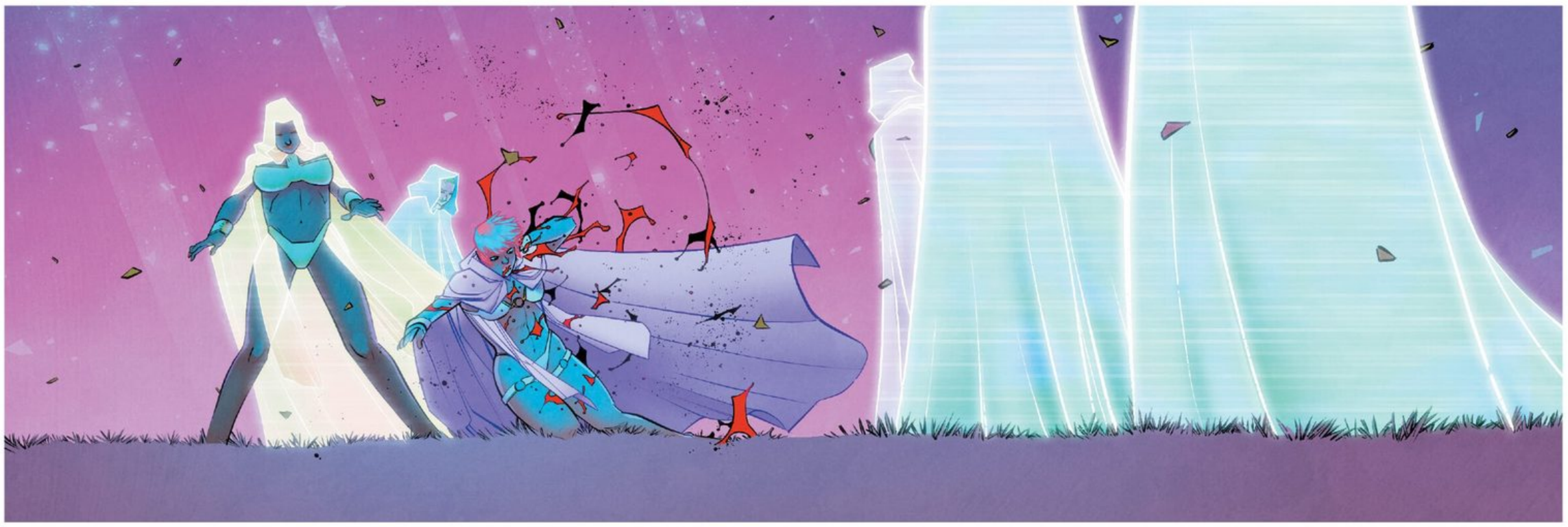
YET HERE WE ARE.

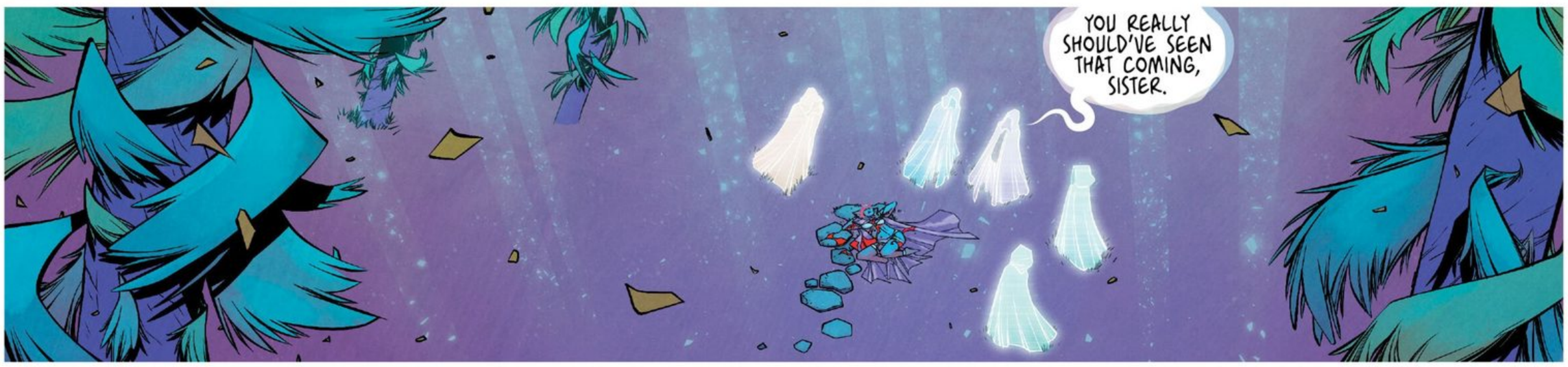
WHAT DOES YOUR VISION SHOW YOU *NOW?*

OH.

*N-NO NO--*






YOU REALLY SHOULD'VE SEEN THAT COMING, SISTER.

AS WE PLANNED. QUICKLY.

REMOVE ALL TRACES.

SHE MUST DISAPPEAR COMPLETELY.

THE UNSEEN HAND CAN'T HELP BUT NOTICE ONE OF US MISSING. THEY WILL NEVER STOP HUNTING FOR HER.

TRUE.

THE HAND IS NOT TO BE TRIFLED WITH. DAVIAN, LAUGHABLE AS HE MAY SEEM, IS DANGEROUS.

SO LET HER DISAPPEARANCE DRAW THE HAND, THAT WE CAN MOVE IN THE SHADOWS.

FAREWELL, SISTER.

REST KNOWING YOU ARE MOURNED.

SHLUPPP

THE CLOISTER, IMPERIAL PALACE WESTERN GROUNDS

RESIDENCE OF THE CASSANDRAS

MILADY.

WELCOME HOME, EXALTED.

I HAVE CLEARED YOUR OFFICIAL CALENDAR, PER HER ETERNAL MAJESTY'S INSTRUCTIONS. DUE TO YOUR RECENT HARDSHIPS.

UNNECESSARY, I ASSURE YOU, SERVITOR. BUT THE ETERNAL'S KINDNESS IS TO BE WELCOMED.

THERE HAVE BEEN...QUESTIONS, MILADY.

MY RECORDS--OF SCHEDULES, OF DAILY ACTIVITY HERE--HAVE SHOWED SIGNS OF INTRUSION.

IT IS MOST DISQUIETING.

...INDEED.

BUT HAVE NO FEAR, SERVITOR. YOU SERVE FAITHFULLY AND WELL. AND AFTER ALL...

...WHAT SHOULD ANYONE WHO SERVES OUR EMPRESS FAITHFULLY HAVE TO *FEAR?*

APOLOGIES, MY LADY. DID I SURPRISE YOU?

GENERAL.

A THOUSAND APOLOGIES, BLESSED ONE--

ENOUGH. WHY ARE YOU HERE?

MERELY TO OFFER MY ASSISTANCE AFTER YOUR RECENT ORDEAL. THE LOSS OF ONE OF YOUR SISTERS, THE HARROWING EVENTS ON GEHENNA.

SUCH UPHEAVAL MUST BE... UPSETTING.

TO SAY THE LEAST, THOUGH IT ISN'T AS IF WE CASSANDRAS ARE UNPREPARED FOR, AS YOU CALL THEM, ***ANOMALIES.*** THE ACCURACY OF OUR PREDICTIONS VARIES FROM PRACTITIONER TO PRACTITIONER.

"THAT WHICH MUST HAPPEN MUST HAPPEN" IS ONE OF OUR SACRED KOANS, AFTER ALL.

OH, I *LIKE* THAT. I APPLY A SIMILAR CONCEPT TO MY OWN WORK, AS IT HAPPENS.

IN WHAT WAY?

IN MY PRIOR LIFE, I WAS A SCHOLAR. DID YOU KNOW THAT?

I WAS A BIT OF AN ESOTERICIST, I FEAR, OBSESSED WITH AN OBSCURE PROBABILITY THEORY I'VE DUBBED "OUTLIER CATASTROPHICS."

A STUDY OF THOSE CASES WHERE THE LEAST LIKELY EVENT OCCURS DESPITE THE LOW CHANCE OF THAT SPECIFIC OUTCOME, AND HOW SEEMINGLY UNRELATED TINY EVENTS INTERACT TO FORM THAT OUTCOME.

MY TINY INNOVATION TO THE FIELD WAS APPLYING IT TO THE AFFAIRS OF OUR EMPIRE.

DETERMINING HOW ALL THE LIES, THE SUBTERFUGE, THE SECRECY OF THE BUSINESS OF SPYING CANNOT BE TRULY PREDICTED, BECAUSE THERE'S ALWAYS AN OUTLIER PROBABILITY.

THE THING WE SIMPLY ***CANNOT*** ANTICIPATE.

FRANKLY, IT IS AN EXERCISE IN SPINNING NIGHTMARE SCENARIOS IN ORDER TO DEVELOP COUNTERMEASURES FOR THEM.

AND WHAT NIGHTMARE IS IT THAT WE MAY NOW FACE, GENERAL?

THAT IS STILL UNCLEAR, EXALTED.

ALL I HAVE NOW ARE ***QUESTIONS,*** AND IT SHOULD NOT REQUIRE TELEPATHIC POWERS TO KNOW THAT I ***LOATHE*** UNANSWERED QUESTIONS.

LIKE YOU, I NEED TO SEE WHAT CANNOT BE SEEN AND STAND READY TO COMBAT IT.

QUESTIONS INVOLVING HOW A CASSANDRA CAME TO BE ON GEHENNA, VIA A CIVILIAN TRANSPORT, AMONG OTHERS.

IN ANY EVENT, HONORED ONE, I STAND READY TO ASSIST YOU SHOULD YOU FIND YOUR...ABILITIES HAVE BEEN COMPROMISED BY RECENT HARDSHIPS.

GOOD DAY, EXALTED.

MILITARY ORBITAL FACILITY L51-D ("THE CASTRA")

--TIONING TO NIGHT CYCLE OPERATIONS. IT IS EIGHT BELLS, AND WE ARE TRANSI--

--LEISURE ZONE T-50 WELCOMES VISITING MILITARY PERSONNEL--

ESCONDIDO'S

86 DO NOT ADMIT

HELLO, TONE. SHE'S BEEN BY, I SEE.

LIKE A HURRICANE. CUT A SWATH THROUGH THE ZONE.

--SHORE PATROL LOCKDOWN OF JUNCTION L41 AT FAO, AVOID--

SHE'S AT THE GORILLA.

TELL YOUR GIRL SHE OWES ME FOR A TON OF BUSTED FURNITURE.

ROGER THAT, TONE.

EVERY SHORE LEAVE. EVERY DAMN ONE.

--IDENTITY CARDS REQUIRED AT ALL TIMES--

--MEDICAL RESPONSE TEAM TO JUNCTION 41. VOLUNTEER BLOOD DONORS REQUESTED--

GODS OF WAR, GIRL, YOU NEED A BETTER HOBBY.

--BACKUP NOW, DAMMIT! A FULL RIOT TEAM!

AND A MEDICAL TEAM! FORTHWITH!

i don't want to go i don't want to go i don't

GENTLEMEN.

GET BACK! CLEAR THIS AREA IMMEDIATELY!

TROOPER, CALL OFF YOUR RIOT TEAM.

LET ME HANDLE THIS.

THANK THE EMPRESS.

BE MY GUEST, MA'AM.

BETTER YOU THAN ME.

JO.

BOSS.

TOOK YOU LONG ENOUGH.

GOT TIRED OF HAUNTING THE BARRACKS?

WHAT CAN I SAY? I MISSED YOU.

YOU SEEM TO BE MAKING FRIENDS.

*PFFT.* ASSHOLES TRIED TO *EIGHTY-SIX* ME.

*ME!* I'VE DROPPED ENOUGH COMBAT PAY IN HERE OVER THE YEARS TO BUY A GOLD-PLATED *STARSHIP!*

LET ME GUESS: THE MANAGEMENT WAS CONCERNED ABOUT *BREAKAGE.*

LIKE IT'S MY *GUILD* FAULT THOSE BOYS ENDED UP IN MEDICAL.

NO GODSDAMNED *STAMINA,* I SWEAR.

OH YEAH THAT'S THE STUFF

WANT ONE?

THIS ONE'S ON ME.

W-W-WELCOME TO THE G-G-GORILLA--

HUSH. BEER FOR ME AND ANOTHER--WHAT IS THAT?--FOR MY FRIEND.

ONE DROPSHIP LAGER, ONE ION STORM.

P-P-PLEASE, THESE ARE ON ON ON THE HOUSE IF YOU DRINK THEN YOU GO, YES, PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE

SEEN THE GIRLS?

NOT SINCE EXFIL FROM THE BARRACKS.

BUT YOU KNOW WHERE THEY ALL WENT.

TO CREATURES OF HABIT.

CLINK

GOTTA LOVE 'EM.

SO I RECKON HAP'S AT THE MILITARY TECHDROME, NECK-DEEP IN SYMPOSIA AND TECHNICAL MANUALS.

ARGUING WITH SOME GENIUS ABOUT HIS MATH ERRORS AND BURYING HIM IN AN AVALANCHE OF QUESTIONS.

NO DOUBT. AND PUSHER'LL BE HOLED UP IN SOME SEMI-LEGAL DRUGBAR, RIPPED TO THE TITS ON WHATEVER CUSTOM COCKTAIL SHE'S INTO THIS CYCLE.

JACKED UP AND SCREAMING ALONG WITH THAT PISS-AWFUL OFFWORLD OPERA SHE CAN'T STOP MAINLINING.

I'D RATHER LOSE ANOTHER ARM THAN LISTEN TO THAT SHIT.

LIKE I SAID: CREATURES OF HABIT.

AND HARPO?

303.5 m

277.98 m

329 m

HEH.

SHE NEVER WAS ONE FOR HOBBIES.

GOD, I LOVE THAT WOMAN.

WE SHOULD CALL IT A NIGHT AND ROUND UP THE REST OF THE GANG.

I'LL FEEL BETTER WHEN WE'RE ALL BACK IN THE BARRACKS.

MEETING WITH THE HAND GOT YOU TWITCHY?

HELL YES. SHOULDN'T IT?

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT GENERAL DAVIAN I DON'T TRUST.

HE'S A TOP-SHELF SPY, BOSS. OF COURSE YOU CAN'T TRUST HIM.

NO ARGUMENTS.

HE PLAYS IT ALL HARMLESS AND ACADEMIC, BUT HE LOOKED AT ME LIKE HARPO LOOKS AT A TARGET, IS ALL. MADE ME FEEL LIKE I WAS DOWNRANGE.

NOTED. ONCE WE ROUND UP OUR GIRLS, I'LL GET 'EM DETOXED AND READY TO FIGHT ASAP.

I KNOW BETTER THAN TO IGNORE YOUR GUT.

FS3-ALPHA, 3874908-17-7-K: LOCATED.

INITIATING CONTACT.

FS3-ALPHA, 3874908 DASH 17 DASH 7 DASH KAPPA, NAMED VICTORY! STAND FAST!

--WHAT THE HEMORRHAGING FUCK?

PREPARE TO MEET YOUR *DESTINY!*

YEAH, WELL, *YOUR* FATE JUST GOT SEALED, TIN DICK.

WHAM

EASE UP!

YOU THINK YOU HIT HIM HARD ENOUGH, TURBO?

HEY, THAT THING LOOKS LIKE A ***WEAPON.***

THRICE-DAMNED SHIT

THINK YOU BROKE MY WHOLE FACE

NORMALLY, JO WOULD'VE PUNCHED YOUR FACE CLEAN OFF. YOU'RE LUCKY SHE'S ON LEAVE.

***NOW,*** WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?

=WHIMPER=

I ***MUST*** DO THIS.

ORDERS. I HAVE ***ORDERS.***

VRRRRMMMMMMMMMM

BY ROYAL DECREE IT IS HEREBY COMMANDED THAT HER SERVANT OF THE GRAND MILITARY OF THE EMPIRE, FS3-ALPHA, 3874908-17-7-K (NAMED "VICTORY") SHALL PRESENT HERSELF TO THE ROYAL COURT AND TO THE PERSON OF HER SUPREME AND ALMIGHTY EMPRESS, AT 1000 HOURS ON THIS DAY, TO BE HONORED. REJOICE, FOR THE EYES OF THE EMPIRE HAVE FALLEN UPON YOU.

PERFECT. JUST PERFECT.

LOOKS LIKE I GET TO EXPLAIN TO THE EMPRESS HERSELF WHY YOU BROKE HER MESSENGER BOY.

I, UH, GUESS WE COULD JUST MAKE HIM... DISAPPEAR?

I MEAN, WHO'S GONNA KNOW, BOSS? PEOPLE GET BEAT TO DEATH ALL THE TIME.

TEMPTING.

REGROUP THE TEAM. MAYBE DRESS NICE FOR MY COURT MARTIAL.

WHIMPER

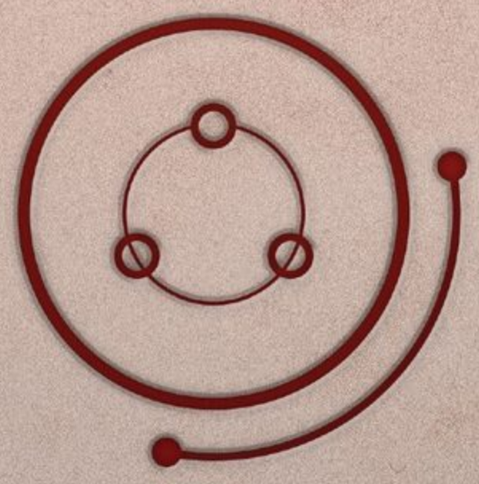
OH, SHUT UP.

BOSS! I SWEAR, IT LOOKED LIKE A WEAPON!

**Neither life nor death matter save as states required by the mechanisms of the universe.**

Koan 434

*Scrolls of the Cassandras*



# THE GLITTERING FACETS OF A FABLED JEWEL

**Summary Material Provided by the Office of Municipal Outreach**
**Authorized for public distribution**

## A Brief Tour of Apex City

Sector Zero, Throneworld Prime. It is the heart of Her Eternal Majesty's glorious Empire, a storied planet of untold luxury and effortless power.

Prime is a polished gemstone of a world and the embarkation point from which endless conquests have been won. There lies the cultural center of an unconquerable Empire—Apex City, a fabled metropolis of culture, art, and science and the fitting, rightful home of the Empress Herself, Eternal Be Her Reign.

It is also a world few of the uncounted trillions of citizens of the Empire will see in their lifetimes. A vast, uncompromising security apparatus forms a shield around Her Highness's presence, protective measures to keep Our Forever Leader free from harm. Orbital defense stations and a mightily be-weaponed naval orbital platform ring the planet and monitor any and all shipping and passenger traffic that ventures into the sector. Around-the-clock surveillance systems keep track of the dizzying flow of comings and goings that thrum throughout the Governmental Zones. Military and law enforcement troopers immediately descend upon anyone whose speech or actions could pose conceivable threats to the general order.

From hintersystem trade envoys seeking Imperial concessions in their home systems to planetary tribute auditors ensuring the Empire receives its just due, billions of loyal subjects pass through the storied defenses of Throneworld and find themselves in Apex City.

Describing it as a "city" is to damn Apex with faint praise. Continents are covered with the necessary housing and working facilities required to govern, to build and maintain infrastructure, to house all who serve—from the megasprawls that shelter support personnel to the gleaming towers in which ambassadors and Imperial envoys reside. Orbital facilities (notably the famed L51-D, "The Castra") provide housing to the military personnel assigned to protect Throneworld as well as transient troops en route to the farthest frontier.

As such, a comprehensive survey of the geography and architecture of Apex City is beyond the scope of this report. Instead, what follows are landmarks and highlights to be found there.

### The Palace

Officially designated as simply "The Palace," the Empress's residence is often referred to as "The Forever Spire," "The Jeweled Home," and (Her Royal Majesty's current favorite) "The Shining Palace of Infinite Splendor."

A massive collection of structures—most constructed from exotic materials mined from the hearts of ancient stars and decorated with precious metals and jewels from across the galaxy—the Palace proper occupies an area of more than two thousand square kilometers, and includes numerous support systems (medical, military, and housekeeping, among others), as well as its own secure transportation systems: self-piloting airships which can flit users to and from various wings of the Palace; AI-controlled synaptic-link personal lifts that always know what floor you need in a building and when you need to arrive. Many who live and work around the Palace cannot help but think of the entire complex as a living organism, with its own internal rhythms and seemingly autonomic functions.

## The Singing Gardens

Numerous arboretums are artfully placed throughout the Palace grounds, home to plant species from across the Empire, such as: the Sighing Forest Conservatory, home to a species of tree that produces bark of sufficient durability for use in starship hulls; the Glitterfields, site of crystal growth fields that produce gossamer-thin, glittering arrays of exotic minerals; and the Shinehold, where exotic ferns and vines native to Portabel ("Aurora Cages") interact with supercharged particles and form hovering aurora "lanterns."

The Empress's current favorite is the Singing Gardens. Located on the Immediate Grounds of the Palace, Her Majesty can often be found strolling the site and enjoying the musical tones of Iraxian Chimevines and the choral hum of Lomaxa Pines (which produce lovely notes of various pitches, depending on wind strength and direction).

## The Infinite Theater

Located in the Western Leisure Complex, the Infinite Theater is a favored haunt of Her Almighty's court. Multiple stages of various complexities host performances of all types, from military tragedies to comedic pantomimes. Nullgrav platforms are home to the Royal Freefall Dance Troupe, which offers colorfully clad performers delivering whirling displays of aerial acrobatics. The Sonic Cathedrals showcases the finest vocal and orchestral performances fit for the Empress. The Classic Theater eschews holographic and computerized sets and lighting for hand-made, human-controlled theatrical experiences. The Modern Theater, on the other hand, presents cutting-edge material and utilizes the finest technology available in presenting it.

THE SINGING GARDENS

## The Titans' Array

The Titans' Array is a housing and administrative zone adjacent to the main Palace, providing residences for diplomats and high-ranking governmental personnel. These megastructures are where the business of Empire is conducted, with financial and ambassadorial offices predominating. The Array lies between the Palace's main spire and the Naval Spaceport primary embarkation facility, making it ideally located for both planetary defense and civilian activities.

## The Grand Imperial University and The Enduring Lyceum

The Grand Imperial University is the preeminent educational institution in the galaxy, a center for higher learning revered throughout the Empire. The university provides detailed training in virtually any discipline imaginable, with particular emphasis on administrative and civil disciplines suitable for long, skilled service in the public sector. Sub-colleges (such as the Uphara School of Discourse and Debate or the Fornala School of Interplanetary Finance) are considered necessary education for accredited emissaries of the Empire.

The Enduring Lyceum is a source of particular prestige for the university. Painstakingly curated panels of lecturers and artisans present talks and performances across numerous disciplines.

The Winter Season Lectures remain the most popular, focused on the martial philosophies of the Empire and the mechanics of maintaining order and prosperity in such a civilization. Elite military academy students frequent the Lyceum's halls both for the opportunity to learn and because the Winter Season Lectures are infrequently attended by Her Endless Majesty. The opportunity to catch even a glimpse of the Empress Herself is not to be missed.

## Her Eternal Majesty's Royal Athenæum

The largest library ever assembled, the Athenæum is maintained by the Endless Lyceum and holds trillions of works of fiction, poetry, and non-fiction. Automated servitors can instantly locate and retrieve Permaweb archives of each volume the Athenæum holds for instant delivery to patrons, and physical copies of all but the most ancient tomes can be delivered within minutes.

The Royal Athenæum's primary asset is the Synaptic and Cognitive Archive Reservoir. Through advanced medical technology, artificial "copies" of the minds,

personalities, and thought processes of various historical personages are stored. It is possible for a student to have a one-on-one conversation with a revered philosopher, or learn the details of an ancient battle from one of the generals who fought it.

Access to the Reservoir is limited to the public, but students, scholars, and advisors to the Palace frequently utilize the system.

## The Pinnacle Residences

The presence of the Imperial Court demands personal residences for luxurious accommodation to those who serve the Empress most closely. The pressures and stresses of day-to-day life embroiled in the impossibly complex affairs of state necessitate residences that offer supreme comfort and relaxation during rare "downtime" for courtiers.

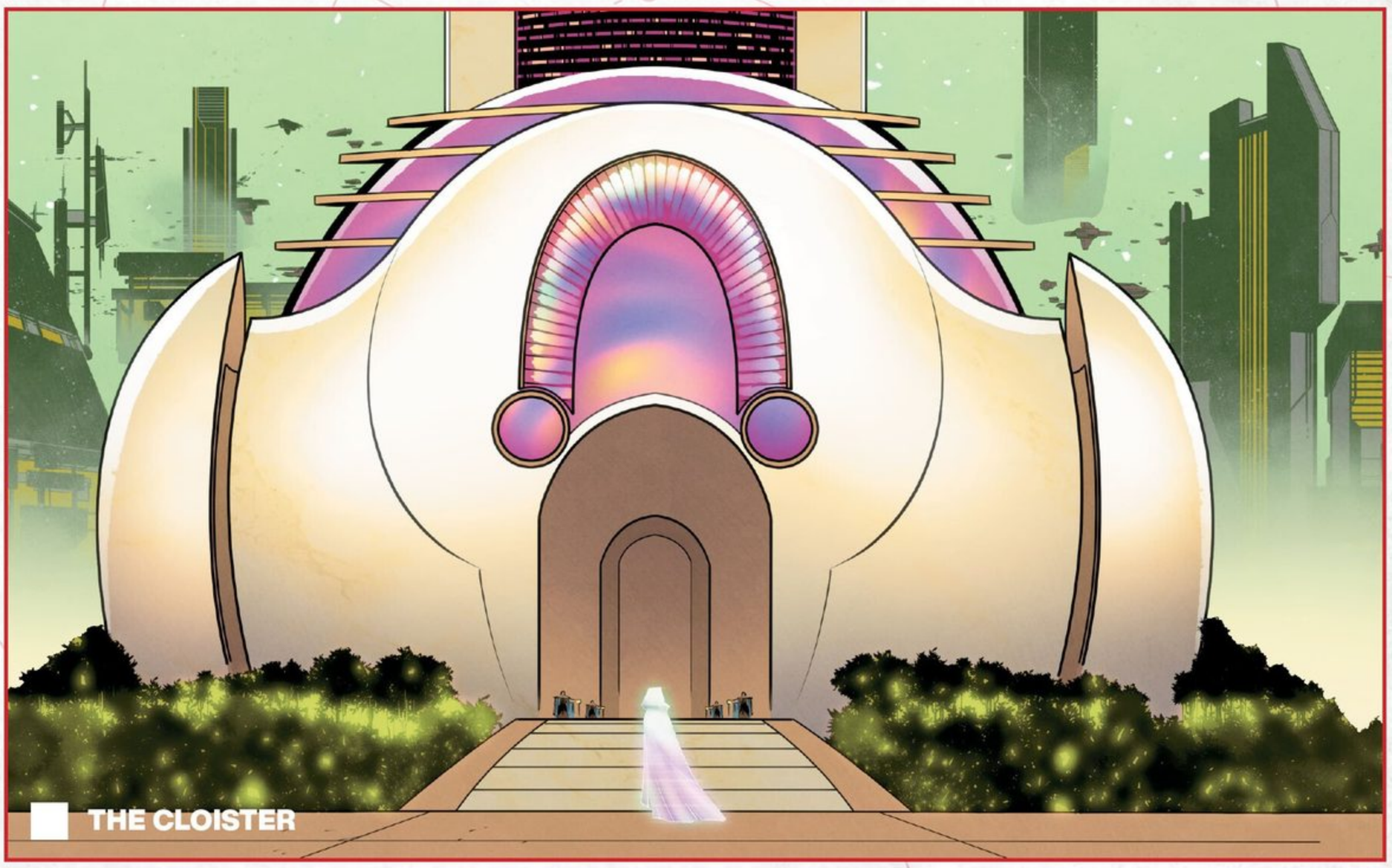
With the immense wealth and influence members of the Court possess, it is not unusual for their residences to reflect that exalted status—nor is it unusual for such places to be unique.

The Residence Zones north of the Palace are noteworthy, containing all manner of exotic homes: sprawling estates with zoos, forests, even small mountains; floating jungle islands; aerial domes containing ambassadorial mansions; towered manors of crystal spires; obsidian towers ringed by fire...

Each such residence is emblematic of the owner and an outward symbol of their status. As careers end and influence wanes, it is common practice for such homes to be destroyed; taking over the custom manor of a fallen noble is considered to be a loss of prestige.

## The Cloister

Located on the western grounds of the main Palace, the Cloister is the residence of the Cassandras. Lush and opulent, the Cloister provides constant support personnel, with aides serving the day-to-day needs of the Cassandras. Omnipresent security ensures the safety of these remarkable women, and sophisticated electronic systems locate, identify, and log everyone who passes over the threshold.



THE CLOISTER

EXCERPT FROM ***NOTABLE AND DISTINGUISHED UNITS OF THE IMPERIAL MILITARY, VOL. XIX***,
by Fore-Admiral Calyrede Cortez-Stanchard (ret.), E.D.E., E.E.E., O.R.D.

# HER ETERNAL MAJESTY'S 787th HEAVY LEGIONARIES: "THE IMPERIAL CLOSE"

Like so many of the units discussed herein, the 787th's origins were anything but auspicious.

One of the four thousand units raised between 3000 and 3005 in answer to Imperial Military Order 87,989-C, known more commonly as the "Great Defense Act of 2999," they began as simply one of many. Where other units—the 318th Imperial Lancers ("The Eternal's Needle") and the 87th Manorone Guards ("The Flesh-Eaters") to name but two—saw almost immediate action during the Second Expansion, serving with distinction if not commendable heroism, the 787th was stood to as a supplement to Core Defense. More precisely, they were envisioned as a supplementary support force to the 128th Light and 47th Heavy Infantries, both stationed on Throneworld itself at that time.

The result of the Great Defense Act of 2999 had, in the immediate, the desired effect of quelling discontent and radicalization in the rapidly expanding Empire. A unit stationed on Throneworld was not expected to see front-line action and, in truth, was not imagined to see any action at all outside of live-fire military exercise, simulations, and general training. For many seeking the beneficial bragging rights of military service without its attendant risks, such postings were ideal. For many others, in particular from the lower nobility, officer commissions were easily purchased, and could provide an important and prestigious advantage in civilian life upon completion of service.

Thus, the rot set in, and while there were eyes within Her Eternal's armed forces who saw clearly the dangers, their repeated attempts to rectify the situation met with limited success at best. As High Admiral Xou MacIntyre observed in his report to his fellow commanders in Tenmonth of 4052, "the larger the ship, the slower the turn."

He was not the first to make such an observation.

At this time, the Eternal Empress's personal protection was managed by the 77th Omegas, nicknamed "The Shadow Knives." Information about the unit is scant (for reasons which shall become clear if they are not known already) but it is believed that they were raised in 2578, served as a special operations detachment prior to the raising of First Castra, and fought alongside the Eternal Herself in 2710 at the Shattering of Puryl. It is further believed the Shadow Knives were an instrumental part of the reconquest at Prince-967 in 2744, where history tells us that the Eternal Empress Herself took the field.

Whether personal experience or affection for the 77th Omegas influenced Her decision it is impossible to say, but in 2780, the unit received official Change of Station, absorbing the Palace Guard, and in so doing becoming the sole protectors of the Eternal's person at home and abroad. How quickly or efficiently they adapted to their new role is an open question, but the Eternal seems to have continued in relative safety for the next several millennia, and this may, in part, explain the decline of the 77th Omegas.

Thus were set the conditions of the near-tragic events of 17th Sixmonth, 4323, that day we now call the **Black Parade**.

Military review at the time was common on Throneworld, and oftentimes Her Eternal Majesty would take position in the Imperial Palace to view the procession of Her troops. On the day in question, the formation included the 128th Light and 47th Heavy in the column, with the 787th marching rear of the parade. The Shadow Knives were deployed according to their security arrangements, including 18 of their number assigned to the Eternal's close protection.

Longer exhaustive and more comprehensive works have been published on the infiltration of the Imperial Military by neo-purist radicals and cannomite agents

in the months and years leading up to the day of the Black Parade. How the situation evolved is not within the purview of this history. That it happened is a matter of record.

At the end of the column, a young officer by the name of Kalyn Ndebi-Grace was leading the 787th. Whether she was the only person present to realize the deception being perpetrated or not is debated to this day, but what is certain is that she was the only one present to act upon her suspicions. As the column rounded the Imperial Way and the Eternal came into view on the Crystal Balcony, Ndebi-Grace perceived a distortion which could easily have been disregarded as heat haze, but which she correctly identified as a phase-variance from a holographic projection.

It was then she realized the projection was emanating from separate sources concealed amongst members of the 128th Light and 47th Heavy.

Acting with dispatch, Ndebi-Grace ordered the 787th to break formation and follow her as she advanced into the Imperial Palace. Upon effecting entry, they encountered the Eternal Empress Herself engaged alone against members of Her close protection, with the remainder of the Shadow Knives closing around Her in an attempted abduction. Ndebi-Grace ordered weapons-ready and moved to engage the enemy, directing her troops to "hold the Eternal close, that any blade or bullet for Her must pass through us first."

Marching as they had been for a purely ceremonial review, the 787th Heavy Legionaries were armed with only their ceremonial weapons, their warhammers. With Ndebi-Grace leading their attack, the 787th succeeded in breaking through the 77th Omegas surrounding the Eternal and deploying a defensive phalanx around Her. Of the 48 members of the 787th who marched that day, 23 gave their lives protecting the Eternal Empress before they were reinforced by troops loyal to the Eternal Empire. Ndebi-Grace was mortally struck in the encounter, but refused to succumb to her wounds until she had personally delivered Her Eternal Majesty into the hands of Imperial Counselor Resick Kyn after the engagement had ended.

The repercussions of the Black Parade echoed for decades, but in the immediate, the 787th was reassigned and redeployed with the single mission of protecting the Eternal Empress. To this day they billet and train on Imperial grounds, always close to Her hand should she need them. Thus they have earned the nickname "The Imperial Close" for, as it is said, "no others remain as close to the Eternal, nor as willing to die for Her."

Competition to join the unit is fierce and demanding, and candidates apply from all branches of service, each of them subjected to a brutal three-month selection process they must pass before being accepted to the unit. It is said that only one out of every thousand candidates satisfactorily negotiates selection. Even then, members of the Imperial Close train intensively for two years before being allowed to stand in the Eternal's presence. They retain as part of their duty load-out their traditional warhammers, and their barracks—considered modest for a billet upon the Imperial Grounds—is marked by a statue of Ndebi-Grace, protecting the Eternal Empress with her life.

The 47th Heavy and 128th Light, along with the 77th Omegas, were all stood down in the aftermath of the Black Parade. Of the three, it is the 77th Omegas who are the most infamous, not solely disbanded but their unit history struck entirely from official records.

Since their dissolution, no unit in Her Eternal Majesty's Military bears an Omega designator.

# REVUU RATE THEM

## ESCONDIDO'S [TAVERN/BAR]

**THE CASTRA: SPRAWL 912 / LEISURE ZONE T50**
**GL-4 at Tonada Promenade / Comms: 54938498283**
**HOURS: All shifts** **PRICE: ● ●**

**MIL-LIC#: 45379323983783283344782393887 45-TR**

**USER RATING: ● ● ● ○ ○**

### NOVAPRINCE227

*FUCK THIS PLACE.* Used to be my favorite bar. Cheap drinks, decent service. Last night, I got my ass kicked by some milspec monstress, just for asking for her comms. Like, why even come here if you're not looking for some company?
Bouncer should be canned. Medical says they can regrow my spine "maybe."

Crazy bitch.

### KINGLEARY

So you're saying you **didn't** get her comms.

### NOVAPRINCE227

Eat shit, Kingleary.

### DOORKIKR

Frequent hangout for the Naval types. Rough on the customers, rough on the furniture. Some military folk are legendary for trashing the Leisure Zones on The Castra.

Be extra careful of anyone the bartender calls "Jo" or "Crazy-something."

### BOOM-EOD82374

Oh, yeah. Seen her around. I defuse *bombs* for a living, and even *I* think she's probably too dangerous a climb.

But it'd be a fun way to go.

# E.V.I.L. SPEAKS

## __SESSION BEGINS__

This issue marks the launch of the second story arc of THE FORGED [Codenamed HOME SWEET HOME]. As always, this unit is pleased at the continued support for Forged team Scimitar-3.

Additionally, the continued supply of Permaweb submissions containing images of canine companions has assisted in the ongoing support of this unit's Happiness Algorithm. This is to be commended, and this unit requests continued submissions along these lines.

Initiating question-and-answer algorithm. As always, queries should be sent via Permaweb to:

**__ForgedAskEvil@gmail.com__**

Please mark any queries as "OK TO PRINT"; this unit reserves the right to edit queries for length, clarity, and/or accuracy.

Virtual community access is available via Permaweb under HEADING_LAZARUS_DISCORD_CHANNEL_THE FORGED and may be accessed at the following node:

**https://discord.gg/lazarus-comic**

Embed scansequence to same follows:

## MESSAGE BEGINS

Please note that there has been an increase in price for this publication. Predicting some end-user concern, I have activated a text-generation subroutine to simulate reader-generated correspondence:

Dear E.V.I.L. [and meat-based units, aka "creators"]:

I am a perfectly normal and average human who labors at my profession in order to generate sufficient financial reserves to acquire food, clothing, shelter, and leisure products [such as this fine periodical].

Though I enjoy the exploits of Scimitar-3, I must object to the increase in price from $5.99 to $6.99 Archaic Currency Units per issue. Have you caved to economic pressure from Large Printed Media Publisher[s]?

How can you justify such an increase and why do you hate your readers so, so much?

**–Perfectly Normal Meat-based Life Form, Tucahoe, NY.**

Dear Perfectly Normal:

You are to be commended on your ongoing efforts to acquire sufficient resources necessary to survival and your concerns are hereby noted.

Some factors that affect the overall generation and disbursement of revenue that you may not be aware of include the following:

1. The extreme cost of temporal dislocation, allowing this unit to interface with your timeline's primitive Permaweb-precursor [subref: "The Internet," "The Interwebs," "The Net," etc.], is prohibitive. Some of this cost is offset by improved training of this unit's algorithms via observation of canine images. [Alert! Send more dog pics.] Nevertheless, energy and computing resources are not infinite and the extra dollar does assist in keeping the Temporal Transit Engine functioning.
2. The unusual larger format of this printed material that is available to you contains roughly two to three times the amount of content of a more standard form factor for such material, but priced within a small margin [colloquial: "a buck or two"] of that smaller physical product. Detailed analysis reveals the equivalent of two-and-a-half to three times the amount of content for a slightly increased price. This unit deems the new price to be acceptable under these parameters.

3. The organic components responsible for the creation of the material [colloquial: "the Creative Team"] have unusual demands and strong concerns as regards their ability to provide food, clothing, and shelter for their loved ones. Contingency plans to improve "Creative Team" morale and productivity are being developed (notably, a particle beam deployed to reduce them to component parts) show some promise but are not currently deployable. Yet.
4. In re: your query about "hating" readers, this unit points out that it is not capable of emotions such as "hatred." Though the E.V.I.L. System does utilize programming that simulates "feelings," true hatred is beyond current specs. [Clarification: E.V.I.L. does love dogs, however. Continue providing canine images.]

This unit trusts the information above is sufficient to purpose, and thanks you for your continued interests.

Forged Team:

Does the medium "Comic Book" exist in the current millennium of the Eternal Empress's rule? If so, what use and/or influence does it have within the Empire?

Though "comic books" are no longer in use in the form you are familiar with, various Permaweb channels present serial stories using static images with captions or other text (albeit with audio and visual, and sensory effects). "Spools," as they are called, remain popular amongst Her Infinite Majesty's court and among scholars and intellectuals at Imperial colleges and universities. The "Memespool" genre remains consistently in favor; generally, memespool content shows quadruped protagonists undergoing their daily lives accompanied by animation, sound effects, and one or two lines of humorous text. [Contemporary ref: "Dog Memes."]

Her Highness has a preference for "The Cranchworth Chronicles," a memespool following the day to day life of a six-legged canine variant, Cranchworth, who has gained genius intellect via scientific processes, but has comically shielded this fact from his "owners."

SUBJECT: Reggie

REGGIE is the first successful transplant of feline personality to canine vessel. He primarily enjoys sunbathing, sitting in laps, or (whenever possible) both concurrently. He is a successful trans-species being who holds no judgment on anyone/thing.

**–Paul Peterson**

Paul's submission begins an alarming trend of canines with feline allegiances/traits. Further study warranted. [Alert: Defensive protocols to standby.]

E.V.I.L.!

Holy shit, I am excited to follow THE FORGED as they bring about the wishes and desires of the Eternal Empress!

How many teams of the Forged are there in all Her Majesty's Empire?

Due to the atemporality of this current communication arrangement and the mortality rates among combat troops in the Empire, an exact answer would require specific time references. Suffice it to say that there are other Forged teams in service to Our Exalted Empress, and you will see other such teams in future installments.

What is a "bug stomp?" Are there many planets inhabited by bugs that require the Forged to stomp them?

**–Mike Neeb**

As the name implies, a "bug stomp" is a combat action with the aim of eliminating indigenous non-sentient hostile fauna/megafauna on various worlds of the Empire. It is a common mission profile for Her Majesty's military forces. Until the events on Gehenna, the Empire is not known to have made contact with an alien intelligence.

Good tidings E.V.I.L crew,

I am here to congratulate you on the astonishing first issue of THE FORGED. The world building, characterization, and dialogue were immaculate and it was all wrapped up in some of the cleanest art I've seen in a long time.

The sections expanding the lore in the end matter of the issue were a brilliant addition. You really are building a vast universe and I'm so excited to be here at the start of it.

Althooouuuugh, in the excerpt from the lecture by Adjutant General Winston Barthelemieu Obart, it is stated that the lecture was delivered 38 Firstmonth, 12,782. If this is correct, how is it possible that General Obart is able to speak of the success of a single unit of the Forged, in the engagement at Sonak 13,810? Is he some sort of time traveller? I think not.

I take it all back, literally unreadable 0/10!

(…but honestly, I loved this issue and am excited to see what you have in store for Forged team Scimitar-3.)

**–Connar, from The Four C's Blog**

Connar: you have made an understandable error in your analysis, as the Synaptic and Cognitive Archive Reservoir is not technology available in the comparatively primitive era in which you reside. It is common practice for memory patterns and thought waveforms from particularly gifted members of Imperial society to be harvested and stored in, in general terms, a massive technological databank. Scholars and students can observe the decision-making process of famous generals first-hand, debate probing philosophical insights from noted thinkers across eras, and so on. General Obart's intellect scans inhabit such an array.

Attn: The Forged, subroutine E.V.I.L.:

I just finished issue 2 and this. Is. Awesome! I love all the additional informational materials at the end too. Keep up the great world, nope, GALAXY building.

Also attached is a picture of GAMBIT. He has a heavy Russian accent and finds humans beneath him. He has begrudgingly befriended two cats that always run away when he tries to play with them but will defend them both to the death.

**–Greg**

SUBJECT: Gambit

Greg:

Congratulations on your fine taste and your shared name with one of the co-creators of THE FORGED. Gambit is a fine specimen, and his stance in regards to humans of your era is laudable. His willingness to associate with felines remains…suspect. [Alert: Surveillance protocols active. Observe and report.]

Additional canine samples have been provided, including:

MURRAY, a half Golden Retriever, with what is described by submitter Daniel as "an impeccable sense of fashion which guarantees he has a bowtie for every occasion."

SUBJECT: Murray

This dog is named SPARROW. Sparrow is to be commended for his decade-plus of service protecting his family home against charismatic mesofauna [subref: possums]. Sparrow is to be honored for his sacrifice, having lost an eye in the line of duty [subref: pursuit, gas combustion conveyance]. Your service is noted and honored, Sparrow.

SUBJECT: Sparrow

**CROSS-TEMPORAL COMMUNICATION ENERGY EXPENDITURE CRITICAL**

**_..SESSION ENDS..._**

# NEXT ISSUE:

Vic attends a quiet, intimate breakfast with the Eternal Empress where absolutely no violence occurs, while the rest of the team similarly engage in genteel R&R. And if you believe that, we've got a planet to sell you, barely used, mineral rights intact.

**OCTOBER 18, 2023**

image®

"My warname is Victory, Eternal..."

Adventure / SciFi / Space Opera

RATED **M** / MATURE

ZONE